

Racial Consciousness in Hemingway's Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores how Hemingway's fiction looks if we bring his non-white characters out of the background and asks how we must define Hemingway's conception of American identity differently when it is constructed on the basis of race. It will help us in understanding Hemingway's works, the American literary tradition, our own grasp of American identity when it is defined by racial difference more than father-son bonding, rejection of women, love of wilderness, or fear in war. It will also help in describing the conflicted place of native Americans in American history and demonstrates how Hemingway first represented this aspect of American history in three Indian stories "Indian Camp", "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" and "Ten Indians".

Key Words: *Indian Culture, White Race, Freedom, Individuality, Racial Identity.*

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Introduction

Since race is the product of biological and cultural constructs of a society, it's inevitable to study the cultural milieu of Hemingway to understand the development of his racial perspective. Starting from his childhood in Michigan, Hemingway very deliberately undermined attempts to pigeonhole him as simply one thing and periodically asserted that he carried one-eighth Indian blood. He claimed that he had a Cheyenne great-great-grandmother and he sometimes lapsed into an abbreviated form of speech that he called "Indian talk" (Montgomery 105). When he wrote to Robert Brown of his initiation into the Wakamba tribe, he referred to his own racial identity with a purposeful emphasis on the category's slipperiness: "I was the first and only white man or 1/8 Indian who was ever a Kamba" (Selected Letters 815).

He had more influence of Indian culture on his personality than the white race. For example, though he was born in Oak Park, Illinois, he never wrote a story set in his home town. Instead he chose to write about the Woods of northern Michigan, a part of the country where he spent every summer of his life until he turned twenty-one years old. His father taught him how to hunt, fish and shoot in the Michigan Woods and his marksmanship was so excellent that the Indians gave him a nickname, "Ne-tech-la-la" or "Eagle Eye". In the Michigan Woods, Hemingway brushed off the white upper class sterility of his home town and became friends with the Native Americans who populated several of his early short-stories: Dick Boulton, Billy Tabeshaw, Prudence Boulton etc. Ever after thirty years, he stopped visiting Michigan, these characters continued to play important roles in his life. For example, Prudence was an Ojibwa girl who, Hemingway claimed, took his virginity and put such an impression on his personality that she appeared in his two short-stories: "Ten Indians" and "Father and Sons". Decades later, in the 1950s, he complimented his wife Mary by announcing that she had legs "just like Trudy Boulton's" (Montgomery 100) and wrote a letter to Archibald Mac Leish pointing out that Debba, his African Fiancée, was "just like Prudy Boulton" (Selected Letters 526). However, little is known about whether he had sexual relationship with her or not. Even his critics have not missed opportunity to comment on the influence of Michigan culture on his wife. Carlos Baker has asserted:

Hemingway was constantly aware of the Indians' presence, like atavistic shadows moving along the edges of his consciousness coming and going without a sound. (A Life Story 13)

Philip Young, his biographer, recognized the importance of Michigan Woods and the native Americans who lived there:

The Hemingway had a house on Walloon Lake; in a region which was populated chiefly by Ojibway Indians ... the parts of the childhood which stuck were the summer times, which were spent in Michigan. (Ernest Hemingway 108)

Despite the general agreement that Hemingway's early identity was bound with the native Americans and their culture, discussions of Hemingway's fiction minimize or ignore the role of native American characters. For example, Philip Young made a concerted effort to explain just how unimportant the native American Characters were to the central plot of any given story. In a discussion of "Indian Camp", Philip Young explained to the readers that it is erroneous to say that the story is in fact about the Indians:

Here as elsewhere Nick is not recognized as protagonist unless one perceives that the last page of the five page piece would be irrelevant if the story were about Indians. (Ernest Hemingway 4) Other early critics supported Young's view by not mentioning the presence of Indians at all. And yet, in the words of Paul Smith, Hemingway's Indian Stories have:

Appealed to all the critical schools and survived them all with something left unanswered... invited and evaded psychoanalytic and archetypal analysis.. sociological interpretation ... and neither they nor the literary historians have drawn on the traditions and history of the Indians in Michigan as they retreated before the white farmers and vacationers. (A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway 41)

Critics have willingly admitted that Hemingway felt passionately about the Native Americans and the Africans, this fact never seemed to have any bearing on analysis and interpretations of his fiction. Scholars have noted that the presence of Native Americans, Africans, and African Americans in his works, though few, have viewed these characters as anything more than scenery; for most the racial elements in Hemingway's works have served primarily as a backdrop to the more central issues of manhood, courage and stoicism. The critical response to issues of race in his works beginning with the earliest biographies and ending with the most recent critical essays on Native American and African American characters reveals pattern of imagination, disavowal, and outright dismissal.

Therefore, the Native American characters in Hemingway's works serve as a vehicle to understand the level of bonding of Hemingway towards them. This connection with primitivism is the product of wide spread cultural phenomenon in 1920s that had an undeniable impact on many of his mentors like Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and consequently on him also. This focus leads him to study the land and the people who inhabited long before the white arrived. The loss of wilderness is a long

established theme in Hemingway's works and his attention to primitivism allows critics to sit back and sigh "Ah yes, the loss of wilderness theme . . .

It is familiar and instantly recognizable, but it diverts attention from the characters and allows readers to avoid the question: what else are non-white characters doing in the story? As such some critics have written about Hemingway's primitivism, have shade the topic into a discussion of the lost wilderness, thereby leaving the native American characters thoroughly overlooked and unexamined. In 1963, Joseph De Falco argued that Hemingway's early stories juxtapose the "primitive", "dark", "intrusive" and "irrational" world of the Indians with the "civilized", "scientific", "secure" and "rational" world represented by Nick's father.

These themes were resurrected in the 1990s by two critics, Robert Lewis and Peter Hays, who believe that Hemingway's stories reflect his abiding interest in primitivism. They argue that Hemingway uses the Indians affectionately as symbols of an earlier era, an era of unexplored frontier and wilderness, natural surroundings unburdened by technological advances, simplicity and authenticity.

Robert Lewis's article, "Long Time Ago Good, Now No Good": Hemingway's Indian Stories" examines the Native Americans who appear in several short-stories and describes how primitivism can help readers understand these characters. Lewis explains that there are two kinds of primitivism, cultural and chronological, and he believes that Hemingway used both:

Far from suggesting crudity and undevelopment, primitivism is a recurrent cultural phenomenon which places value on the simplicity of social forms and finds sophistication a companion of cultural degeneration and even evil. The cultural primitive then wishes to restructure society and all aspects of it, from art to family, along lines that are felt to be more natural and better suited for the capacities and desires of human beings. . . . Chronological primitivism looks not forward to amelioration of the human condition but backward to sometime in the past when human condition was if not Edenic at least holistic and characterized by reverence for life, high moral purpose, humane dealings and beauty. (207-208)

But he does not believe that they constitute a major element of Hemingway's work. Lewis also made an effort to show how Hemingway rejects "the nonsense in romanticizing primitives" (206), and yet his own conclusion seems to reify the very tendency to romanticize. He concludes his article by saying that the Indians function "perhaps as a trace element essential to psychic health" (211). Historically, the native Americans have suffered devastation at the hands of whites who were engaged in genocidal campaigns against the native Americans from the 1490s through the

twentieth century expelling families from their homes and claiming the cleared land for white settlements. When whites met with resistance, they relied on forced relocation or outright war under orders from the U.S. government. Considering this aspect of white-Indian relations, it is hard to imagine how their presence could provide psychic health to any of the characters in Hemingway's fiction. In 1999 Peter Hays explicitly supported Robert Lewis's argument about Hemingway's use of Native Americans in his early fiction. Hays, going one step ahead to Robert Lewis, argues about Hemingway's use of native Americans that they are just trace elements, believed that they "are never major characters, but rather serve as foils to increase our understanding of the nature of the protagonist" (1). Hays do not consider native Americans as characters instead he argues: "In northern Michigan, where many of Hemingway's stories are set, Indians are a part of the landscape, like hemlock forests and lakes" (2). As such native Americans have been considered as if they have no identity and are part of landscape rather than human beings.

These interpretations of native characters represent a very clear and consistent support to the well-established critical interpretation of Hemingway and his work just raising the issue of the native Americans only to highlight their tiny role in elucidating the white male protagonists. A closer inspection of Hemingway's native American characters shows that these are not men and women who merge with or fade into the landscape, and the overtly paternalistic readings do not hold up to serious scrutiny.

Hemingway created an Indian woman whose womb was cut open by a white man with a jack knife and her skin sewed up with fishing line and her husband, for whom her pain was intolerable, slit his throat during the operation. Hemingway depicted a group of Indians visiting the white man's home armed with saws and axes issuing threats to the white doctor. Hemingway has presented Indians laying face down in the sand or across the railroad tracks, victims of alcoholism, suicide, and murder. More than simply offering an elegy for a once pristine American landscape, these stories attempt to address the tragic and unjust circumstances of native American in the twentieth-century America. If his childhood years were infatuated with the Indians, his adult life revealed his obsession with the inhabitants of Africa.

Coming to his exposure of black race of Africa, his first visit to Africa was in 1933 with his wife Pauline Pfeiffer. It is the exposure to Africans that resulted into his many short-stories and novels. During their African trip, they were led on a safari by the famous white hunter Philip Percival, though the trip began badly due to a case of amoebic dysentery that sent Hemingway to Nairobi for emergency treatment. It was during his treatment time that he began to feel euphoric about Africa:

This was the kind of hunting I liked. No riding in cars, the country broken up instead of plains... simply to walk and to be able to hunt, not knowing what we might see and free to shoot for the meat we needed. (A Life Story 252)

All these aspects of hunting filled him with pleasure and enthusiasm which he felt during his childhood with his father in the Michigan and the native Americans. He enjoyed watching one of the African trackers' walk, "he strode very loosely and with a slight lift" and as soon as he and Pauline left the country, he started yearning for it: "He was hungry for more of it, the changes of the seasons, the rains with no need to travel . . . the discomforts that you paid to make it real" (256). He was so happy to be in Africa that on returning he told the reporters that he had planned to earn enough money so that he could return to Africa. And his wish was fulfilled in 1953 when he went to Africa in 1953 with Mary Welsh Hemingway, his fourth wife.

As such Hemingway's many experiences in the African continent, specifically in Tanganyika and Kenya, paralleled his early years among the native Americans in northern Michigan. He admired the men of the Wakamba tribe immensely and tried to establish a brotherhood with them. To mix up with them he tried get familiar with their culture and tried to mould himself accordingly. He learned some key words of their language, dressed like them, get his head shaved and hunted by moonlight with a spear. Above all, inspite of his wife Mary accompanying him, he attempted to struck up a relationship with a Wakamba woman named Debba, who he said reminded him of his first love, Prudence Boulton. Hemingway himself has tried to draw an analogy between his childhood memories of northern Michigan and his experiences in Africa:

There are always mystical countries that are a part of one's childhood. . . In Africa when we lived on the small plain in the shade of the big thorn trees at the edge of the swamp at the foot of the great mountain we had such countries. We were no longer, technically, children although in many ways I am quite sure that we were. (Under Kilimanjaro 23)

Therefore, the African country has a lot of imaginative power for Hemingway and he has revealed this through his literary works.

Despite this fact critics have approached his "African Stories" with the assumption that these, too, are exclusively meant to elucidate the white American male characters and traditional Hemingway themes. Through his article "The Two African Stories",

Carlos Baker has tried to hint at the relevance of location and character, his thesis could be applied to a story set anywhere in small town America:

Both stories deal with the achievement and loss of moral manhood.
Both look further into the now familiar men-without women theme.
The focal point in each that is the corrupt power of women and money. (*A Life Story* 252)

Just as Hemingway's Indian stories provided critics with the opportunity to rehash themes of the lost wilderness, these African stories instigated Baker and other critics to revisit well-established themes of moral manhood and men-without-women so that the presence of Africa and Africans can be entirely ignored. Hemingway reacted by saying that Africa and the Africans are an integral part of his stories. Writing to his editor he said he had finished a "very exciting story of Africa" tentatively titled "A Building Friendship" and he had yet "another story" of Africa called "The Happy Ending" (*Selected Letters* 442). All these comments from the side of Hemingway indicate that by essence his stories are African.

Many concepts which are found in Hemingway's works like freedom, individuality, innocence, loss, and masculinity are completely enmeshed and entwined with racial tropes of whiteness versus blackness, dominance versus subordination, conquest versus discovery. Hemingway's early short-stories consistently relied on the presence of Native Americans or African Americans as a driving force behind the narrative tension. His interest in race and racial issues comes to forefront in many forms like attention to skin colour and skin colour changes, the performativity of racial identity, white-Indian relations, conquest of the land, an American obsession with the Great White Hope, British imperialism, African tribal culture, rebellions against white colonialists, miscegenation.

This paper explores how Hemingway's fiction looks if we bring his non-white characters out of the background and asks how we must define Hemingway's conception of American identity differently when it is constructed on the basis of race. It will help us in understanding Hemingway's works, the American literary tradition, our own grasp of American identity when it is defined by racial difference more than father-son bonding, rejection of women, love of wilderness, or fear in war. It will also help in describing the conflicted place of native Americans in American history and demonstrates how Hemingway first represented this aspect of American history in three Indian stories "Indian Camp", "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" and "Ten Indians". Next step is a close reading of Hemingway's stories that incorporate Africans and African Americans, exploring the effects of

white supremacist attitude in “The Battler” and “The Light of the World”. How British colonialism in Africa affects life of people is revealed through the “The Short, Happy life of Frances Macomber” and “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”.

His correspondence since 1950s onwards shows that he deeply admired the Africans with whom he lived and hunted during his Safari. He very badly wanted to pierce his ears and cut his face in order to look like the African men he admired. In the midst of making his decision, he received the following letter from his wife Mary:

The fiction that having your ears pierced will make you a Kamba is an evasion of the early, which is that you are not and never can be anything but an honorary Kamba, and that it is out of harmony with your best character which is that of a wise, thoughtful, realistic adult white American male.

I know that you are impassioned about Africa and the Africans, writing about them, and allured by the mystery and excitement of becoming one of them. And you know that I love the fun and make-believe as much as you do. But the attempt to convert fantasy into actuality can also result, I think, in distortion and failure. There are other ways of providing brotherhood between you and the Kamba. I do hope you find them, my Big Sweet heart Mary. (Selected Letters 565)

This letter has revealed the secret that Hemingway was interested in experimentation with racial identity.

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